



Staff photos by John Metzger

Inland Empire participants (from left) Virginia Boggust, Nola Rhodes and Janice Hoffman chart their flight route.

Emotions are high on the eve of the final Powder Puff Derby

By JAN CLEVELAND
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PALM SPRINGS — "I'm just so excited I can hardly sit still," said Janice Hoffman, bouncing in her chair.

"I'm just thrilled to be able to fly in this race," she grinned.

Hoffman of Blue Jay and her friends, Nola Rhodes of Riverside and Virginia Boggust of San Bernardino, were sitting in a Palm Springs motel room Thursday morning, making the final preparations for their flight in the Powder Puff Derby.

Their excitement was like that of a child on the day before Christmas. The only cloud on their horizons was the fact that their first derby flight would be their last. The Powder Puff Derby will be no more when the fliers reach Tampa, Fla. on July 4 after Friday's takeoff.

"I've never flown in this race before. I've been trying for several years but there has been some disaster that has kept me from it. Last year I broke my wrist just before the race," Rhodes said, pushing back her shoulder-length red hair.

Because it is the final derby, officials relaxed the rules a little. That encouraged Rhodes to fly. In previous years her Cessna 210 had been too powerful to compete with other, smaller planes.

Rhodes is the team's pilot, Boggust co-pilot and Hoffman passenger.

"I'm going to have the best deal. All I have to do is sit back and enjoy the ride," Hoffman joked as she studied the flight charts for the hundredth time.

"This is the first time they've ever allowed passengers and even they have to have a pilot's license. I couldn't go except as a passenger because I don't have enough flight time," she said.

The three women had checked in at the Palm Springs Riviera Hotel the day before the derby to attend a pilot briefing and a special take-off banquet. Their plane had also had to get to the airport early so that All-Women Transcontinental Air Race (AWTAR) officials could impound and thoroughly inspect it.

The pilots were not allowed back in their aircraft, which were kept in a locked, guarded compound at the airport, until Friday morning.

Sitting on the motel room bed, Rhodes looked as if she might fly into a million pieces from the anxiety of getting everything organized for the flight.

"I've just been going like mad for the past several days. I get so wound up it's hard to slow down," she said.

"We've been doing our flight planning and we have maps spread all over my room. I told the maid not to even bother cleaning it," she laughed.

In Hoffman's room, charts were spread over a small table. From time to time she glanced down at them, checking and re-checking her team's plans.

"We have to route out our trip, get all the headings and the radio frequencies, figure the mileage and then figure the amount of gasoline and how far you'll be able to fly," Rhodes explained.

"And then we have weather to contend with. If there are thunderstorms you must go around them or go down and wait them out. I hear they have been having a few storms along our route, too," she said, grimacing.

Rhodes has been flying about nine years. She and her husband, who owns American Distributing Co., have taken lessons together. His company, along with Lynn's Aircraft Engines of Long Beach, is sponsoring the trio's derby flight.

Asked how she got interested in flying, Hoffman said, "It was because of my kids."

"My son was building remote control airplanes and I was really interested in them. I said, 'If I build one of those, could I use your con-

trols to fly it?' He said, 'I'm just doing this because I'm a kid. You're an adult, so why don't you go ahead and do the real thing?' So I did. I do listen to my kids occasionally," she said, her smile appearing again.

"I'd always been an airplane watcher but I was kind of afraid to fly. But I took a lesson and my instructor actually let me fly the plane for about 45 minutes. After that, I knew I had to learn. Flying is great. I highly recommend it to everyone," Hoffman said.

Rhodes added, "We don't think it's an expensive sport. Some boats cost more than our planes."

Boggust, a bookkeeper, has been flying for about five years and is chairman of the Inland Chapter of the Ninety-Nines, a club for women pilots that was founded by Amelia Earhart. Boggust also belongs to the Redlands-based Sierra Vista flying club.

"Oh, you guys," she said, grinning and running her hands through her short, straight hair, "I wish I could have gotten here a couple of days ago. 'I might as well have. I sure couldn't work. I was always thinking

about the race and whether the plane would pass the inspection," she said.

Rhodes' team was not the only one in the derby with San Bernardino County residents on it. Stephanie A. Wells of George Air Force Base and Wendy H. Hurst of Victorville are flying a Beechcraft T-34 sponsored by the member of the California wing of the Civil Air Patrol. Also flying are Colleen Armstrong and Jeanine M. Bertrand, both of Yucca Valley, in a Navion; and Margaret Mason Bolton of Apple Valley and Dixie Lee Miller of China Lake in a Piper Comanche sponsored by Col. Burke West, USMC-Ret., of Ridgecrest.

Although Hoffman, Rhodes and Boggust seemed to think the actual day of the flight, like Christmas, would never arrive, it finally did. The three stood outside their plane, which survived the impound inspection, trying to pack in all their luggage and gear.

"Where am I going to sit," Hoffman wailed, looking at the tiny back seats piled high with suitcases and other paraphernalia.

"We've got too much stuff, Nola," she announced.

But they quickly decided it was all essential so Hoffman began the task of clearing off her seat. Finally it was finished and there was nothing more to do but fly off to Tucson, the first stop on their route.

The women hope to be in Tampa by July 3, if the weather cooperates. They'll stay there until at least July 6, then begin the homeward flight, stopping in Missouri to visit relatives.

"We have to stay in Tampa until the sixth so we can pick up our trophy," Rhodes said.

But Hoffman added, "We don't expect to win, we're just dreaming. We just want to enjoy the flight in safety and complete the race. Those are the most important things."

Soon the airport officials were telling them it was time to take off. They climbed into the Cessna, started the engine and began taxiing down the runway, waving happily to the by-standers and other pilots.

Their Christmas had finally come and they were ready to enjoy it to the hilt.